

**Recruitment and Retention of Sworn Sheriffs' Personnel**

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**Introduction**

The Governor's Crime Commission, in conjunction with the North Carolina Criminal Justice Education and Training Standards Commission and the North Carolina Sheriffs' Education and Training Standards Commission, held a combined three commission planning retreat in the early summer of 2000 to identify and address the major emerging issues facing the state's criminal justice system and its public safety personnel. The issue of recruitment and retention was identified as a significant area of concern with the joint commissions requesting that an in-depth and statewide study be conducted in this area. Specifically, four such studies were requested with each study focusing on one segment of the public safety community. Research studies on recruiting and retaining sworn police officers, sworn deputy sheriffs, detention facility personnel and telecommunicators were completed by members of the North Carolina Criminal Justice Analysis Center and staff from the two training and standards commissions. This issue of SystemStats presents a condensed version of the final report on recruiting and retaining sworn personnel from sheriffs' offices.

**Methods***Survey Instrument*

A 22- item survey was developed by the study team with the first section of the questionnaire presenting questions which addressed the issue of recruiting sworn law enforcement personnel within the sheriff's office. The survey items dealt with recruitment strategies and techniques, the number of applicants, and the extent to which the responding agency had a backlog or waiting list of potential candidates. Respondents were also given the opportunity to comment on what course(s) of action should be undertaken to improve the recruitment of sworn deputy sheriffs and to build a more qualified applicant pool.

Part two addressed the issue of attrition and retention and included questions which were designed to detail the responding agency's turnover and vacancy rates and how these have varied over the past three years. Other questions focused on obstacles which hinder successful recruitment, techniques for retaining sworn deputy sheriffs, and reasons why officers leave the agency. Respondents were also given the chance to offer suggestions for improving personnel retention.

*Survey Sample*

A list of North Carolina's sheriffs' offices was provided by staff of the Sheriffs' Education and Training Standards Commission and was used as the basis for selecting those sheriffs' offices which would be included in the survey sample. The list was divided into four groups, or quartiles, based upon the median number of sworn personnel.

A proportionate number of agencies, relative to the percent of agencies in each of the four groups, were sampled and selected to receive a copy of the survey in the mail. A total of 80 surveys were distributed with 20 (25 %) going to agencies with more than 73 sworn officers, 18 (22.5%) to agencies with 43 to 73 sworn officers, and 22 (27.5%) being mailed to agencies with 23 to 42 sworn officers. The remaining 20 surveys (25%) were mailed to the state's smallest law enforcement agencies, defined as having fewer than 23 full-time sworn officers.

**Results**

A total of 49 surveys were returned producing a study response rate of 61.3 percent.

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## Recruitment and Retention of Sworn Sheriffs' Personnel

### *Recruitment Issues*

Twenty-seven respondents (56.3 percent of the sample) described their respective sheriffs' offices' recruitment strategies as neutral. Eleven agencies' strategies were rated as being either passive or somewhat passive (22.9%) with the remaining ten agencies possessing aggressive recruitment strategies (20.8%). None of the respondents suggested that their offices had strongly aggressive recruitment tactics.

The most frequently used recruitment techniques were word of mouth (93.9%), the community college system (83.7%) and employing officers from an existing auxiliary or reserve force (75.5%). Local personnel listings (67.3%), newspapers (61.2%), job fairs (61.2%) and the Internet (61.2%) were also frequently employed

recruitment techniques with more than half of the study respondents noting that their offices relied on these methods. The Police Corps program (51.0%) and radio/television (44.9%) were the least used methods, however a large percentage of the sheriffs' offices still used these two techniques to recruit sworn personnel. As the data suggest, while the majority of the responding offices are not implementing aggressive recruitment strategies, they are nonetheless using a wide variety of recruitment strategies and are not limiting their recruitment initiatives to only one or two of the traditional strategies. It appears that the responding sheriffs' offices are being innovative and forward thinking as they are taking advantage of new programs and the latest technological developments to assist in their respective recruitment efforts (Refer to Table 1 below).

Table 1 Recruitment Techniques and their Perceived Effectiveness

Technique	Number Using	% Using	Average Effectiveness Rating (0 to 9)
Word of mouth	46	93.9%	6.8
Community college	41	83.7%	6.2
Auxiliary/Reserves	37	75.5%	6.2
Local personnel listings	33	67.3%	3.9
Internet	30	61.2%	2.4
Newspapers	30	61.2%	4.6
Job Fairs	30	61.2%	3.4
Police Corps	25	51.0%	1.2
Radio/TV	22	44.9%	.8

Note: Survey respondents were encouraged to select all recruitment techniques which were utilized by their agencies, thus percentages do not equal 100.

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## Recruitment and Retention of Sworn Sheriffs' Personnel

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Table 1 (page 2) also depicts the average effectiveness rating for the nine recruitment techniques which were listed in the survey. Respondents were asked to rate each recruitment technique on a scale from zero, not effective, to nine, highly effective. The top three most effective techniques were word of mouth ( $X=6.8$ ), community colleges ( $X=6.2$ ) and auxiliary/reserve forces ( $X=6.2$ ). The least effective recruitment techniques were perceived to be the Internet ( $X=2.4$ ), the Police Corps program ( $X=1.2$ ) and radio/television ( $X=.8$ ). Thus, the data suggest that the most effective techniques are also the most frequently used. In other words, while sheriffs' offices use all types of recruitment techniques they rely most heavily on what has proven to be the most effective, in the past, for finding potential applicants.

Over one-half of the participating sheriffs' offices (57.1%) currently have a waiting list, or backlog, of qualified deputy sheriff applicants. The number of applicants on these lists ranged from two to 50 with a sample wide average of 12.2 individuals per waiting list.

Survey participants were also asked to delineate the number of applicants, per vacant sworn deputy

position, within their agencies. The number of applicants for each vacant position ranged from zero to 25 with a sample wide average of 6.2 applicants per posted position.

The research team identified ten possible obstacles, or barriers, to recruiting more qualified applicants with the survey respondents being asked to list all which have negatively impacted upon local recruitment in their respective agencies. As Figures 1 and 2 suggest the three most common barriers were agency budget restrictions (85.7%), competition with other criminal justice agencies (75.5%), and competition with the private sector (42.9%). The remaining seven identified obstacles posed less of a problem for the sheriffs' offices with less than one-third of the offices experiencing significant problems due to these barriers. The research did not support commonly held assumptions, or stereotypes, which are often associated with working in rural and small jurisdictions. It is often erroneously assumed that residency requirements and the size and location of rural law enforcement agencies act as negative barriers, or exert a deterring effect, for recruiting sworn personnel. These three factors were heavily discounted by the participating sheriffs' offices and did not appear to act as barriers to successful recruiting efforts.

**Figure 1                      Barriers to Effectively Recruiting the Best Possible Candidates**

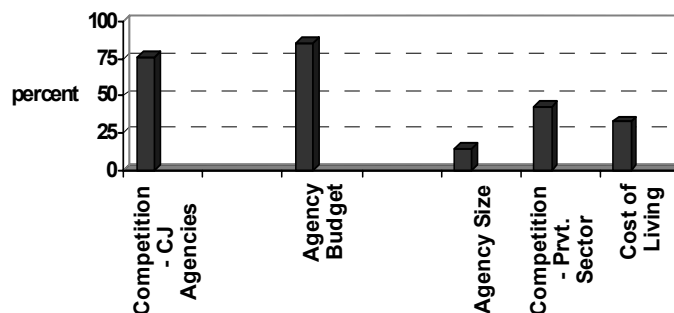
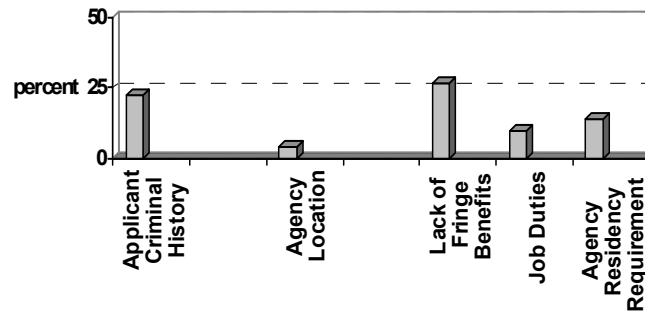


Figure 2 Barriers to Effectively Recruiting the Best Possible Candidates



The study team also thought it was important to ascertain the extent to which sheriffs' offices hire applicants who have already completed BLET, versus hiring applicants and then sponsoring their BLET training during the state mandated time period after employment. Survey questions addressed both sides of the coin by soliciting participants to state the percent of both pre and post BLET hires. The percentage of applicants who are hired prior to BLET completion ranged from zero to 95 percent with 21 (42.9 %) agencies requiring all applicants to complete BLET before they are employed. Across the entire study sample the average sheriffs' office hires 80 percent of its applicants from an applicant pool that has already completed a BLET program.

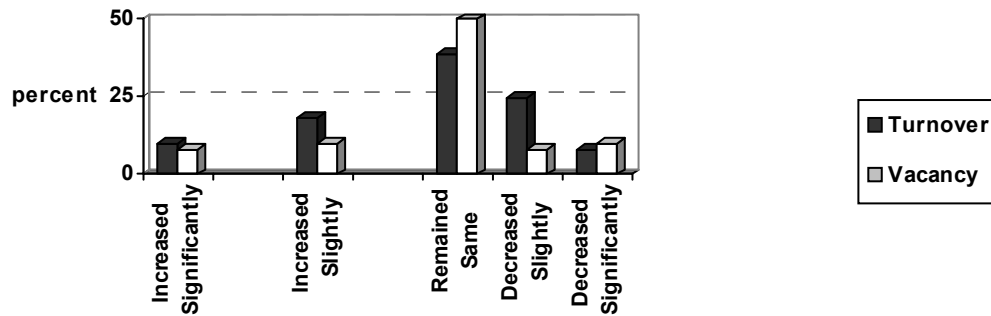
Survey respondents were asked through an open-ended question to comment on any ideas that they had for improving the quality of future sworn deputy sheriff applicant pools. Responses tended to cluster in two areas with the salary and benefits issue ranking as the number one area where improvements are needed. Of those officers who answered the question, exactly 50 percent mentioned improving salaries as a means of improving the quality of future applicant pools. Nearly one in five survey participants suggested making improvements by conducting better background checks and implementing stricter standards for screening applicants *prior to* enrollment in BLET.

#### *Attrition and Retention Issues*

Turnover rates for sworn deputy positions, using July 2001 as a base, ranged from zero to 60 percent with an average turnover rate of 12.7 percent being reported for those agencies returning completed surveys. As Figure 3 (page 5) documents 38.8 percent of the respondents noted that their agency's turnover rate has remained stable for the past three years. Slightly more than a quarter of the agencies (28.6%) experienced either a significant, or slight, rise in their respective turnover rates while turnover rates dropped for 32.6 percent of the sheriffs' offices.

Vacancy rates for sworn positions, using June 2002 as a base, ranged from zero to 45 percent with over half (53.1%) of the agencies reporting a full sworn force with no vacant sworn positions on June 30, 2002. The average vacancy rate for sworn positions was a modest 5.5 percent. Statewide trends in the vacancy rates indicate that 63.3 percent of the offices' report no discernible changes; i.e. vacancy rates have remained stable during the last three years for these sheriffs' offices. Eighteen percent of the participants reported an increase in their vacancy rates over the last three years, with an identical percentage noting a decline during this period.

Figure 3 Turnover and Vacancy Rates Over the Past Three Years



Respondents were offered a list of six different techniques for personnel retention and were asked to specify each technique which is used by their agencies and to rank each in terms of their effectiveness on a scale from zero, not effective, to nine, highly effective.

As Table 2 (page 6) reveals the most popular retention strategy was holding and using a vigorous and fair promotion strategy with 38, (77.6%), of the respondents noting that their respective agencies use this approach. Offering educational incentives, such as tuition reimbursement and allowing officers to attend classes during work hours, was the second most frequently employed technique (75.5%) followed by an annual pay increase, irrespective of job performance (73.5%). All of the six retention techniques were frequently used with more than half the sample noting that their offices employed all six in some form or fashion.

Survey participant ratings on the effectiveness of the six retention techniques are also provided in Table 2. As a general rule the most frequently used retention techniques were also perceived to be the most effective with the exception of promotions and education and training at office expense. These two were reversed with the participants rating education and training as more effective than formal promotions, despite the fact that promotions were used by a slightly larger number of offices.

Table 3 (page 7) depicts the reasons which explain attrition rates within the responding sheriffs' offices; with agency budget restrictions (91.8%) being reported as the most frequently discussed factor when explaining why sworn personnel leave the sheriff's office. A high percentage of the respondents (83.7%) also noted that lateral transfers to other law enforcement agencies, retirement (63.3%) and individuals resigning to accept employment in the private sector (57.1%) were substantial factors which impact upon their respective agency attrition rates. The data suggest that all of the listed attrition factors are exerting some impact upon the state's sheriffs' offices with the least frequently occurring factors still being reported in over 40 percent of the responding sheriffs' offices.

Respondents were asked to identify the extent to which each factor impacts their agency's attrition, i.e. to select the best response from a range of percentages. Over half of the respondents (53.4%) noted that agency budget restrictions accounted for 71-100 percent of their agency's total attrition rate. Over one-half noted that lateral transfers to other law enforcement agencies explained between 51-60 percent of their attrition. Three-fourths of the respondents noted that for every three to five resignations the officers were leaving to accept employment in the private sector. While retirement affected a majority of the sheriffs' offices only a few noted that it accounted for a significant portion of their overall attrition.

## Recruitment and Retention of Sworn Sheriffs' Personnel

Table 2 Retention Techniques and their Perceived Effectiveness

Technique	Number Using	% Using	Average Effectiveness Rating (0 to 9)
Promotions	38	77.6%	5.0
Education/training agency expense	37	75.5%	6.0
Annual pay increase irrespective of performance	36	73.5%	5.8
Annual pay increase performance based	31	63.3%	5.3
Formal awards, recognition	30	61.2%	4.3
Assigned favorable work shift	30	61.2%	4.5

Note: Survey respondents were encouraged to select all retention techniques which were utilized by their agencies, thus percentages do not equal 100.

Three-fourths of the offices stated that retirement explained 20 percent or less of their total attrition. Surprisingly, all of the remaining factors were discounted as significant contributors with the majority of the respondents noting that these factors account for less than 10 percent of their agency's total attrition. In other words, agency budget restrictions, lateral transfers and losing officers to the private sector account for the bulk of the sheriffs' offices' attrition rates. While the remaining factors do explain some attrition, or occur in a large number of the departments, they do not occur frequently enough to drive a sizeable decline in the sworn personnel workforce.

Further questions were asked in an effort to refine and explore at a much more detailed level, the extent to which lateral transfers impact agency attrition. Specifically, to ascertain which types of agencies sworn sheriffs' personnel are leaving for when they are granted a lateral transfer.

Over 80 percent of the responding agencies lost officers to larger law enforcement departments, suggesting that higher salaries and more competitive benefits may explain these losses. Lateral transfers to state law enforcement agencies was the second highest reported type of lateral transfer (69.4%) followed by employment with similar size departments (61.2%). Forty-nine percent of the sheriffs' offices reported that they are

## Recruitment and Retention of Sworn Sheriffs' Personnel

losing sworn personnel to smaller law enforcement agencies. This suggests that many officers possibly eschew higher salaries, or receive the same salary, yet obtain a mid to senior level executive management position, i.e. sacrifice pay increases for the prestige of being a high ranking command officer in a smaller jurisdiction.

The data suggest that lateral transfers to larger law enforcement agencies and state law enforcement agencies are most prevalent in the participating sheriffs' offices with these two types of transfers explaining the bulk of the total number of transfers. In other words, the majority of the sheriffs' offices are losing the majority of their sworn personnel to larger and state criminal justice agencies. While personnel are also leaving to work in same size and smaller criminal justice agencies these losses are not significant and sizeable enough to exert a major impact on the sheriffs' offices' sworn workforce.

Table 3 Causal Factors for Sheriffs' Personnel Attrition Rates

Factor	Number Reporting	Percentage
Agency budget restrictions	45	91.8%
Transfer to another law enforcement agency	41	83.7%
Retirement	31	63.3%
Left for private sector	28	57.1%
Cost of living	27	55.1%
Prior/current criminal history decertification	23	46.9%
Job duties	23	46.9%
Agency size	23	46.9%
Lack of fringe benefits	23	46.9%
Agency location	22	44.9%
Unrealistic officer expectations	21	42.9%
Residency requirement	20	40.8%

Note: Survey respondents were encouraged to select all attrition factors which affect their agencies, thus percentages do not equal 100.

## Recruitment and Retention of Sworn Sheriffs' Personnel

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Overall, irrespective of the reasons why officers leave, the average length of an officer's employment is 28 months before he/she decides to leave the sheriffs' office. Sixty-one percent of the participating sheriffs' offices reported an average length of stay at 28 months or less with 83 percent reporting that their respective average length of stay was three years or less. Thus, it appears that a critical period of two years, four months, to three years, exists in which sheriffs' offices can implement policies and/or programs to improve retention rates and conversely minimize its attrition rate by retaining officers beyond this critical period. Once an officer is retained beyond this critical period, attrition drops precipitously. Only 17 percent of the offices reported an average length of stay, for those officers that eventually leave the agency, which was greater than three years.

### Discussion and Policy Implications/Recommendations

It is extremely important to consider external events and the current economic situation, which the state's sheriffs' offices are experiencing, as a contextual framework when interpreting the results of the current study. The events of 9/11 and the subsequent war on terrorism, the current fiscal crisis and recession as well as the situation in Iraq have and will impact recruitment and retention issues among the state's sheriffs' offices. Economic concerns and limitations may limit attrition as individual officers have fewer options to pursue outside of their current position, i.e. fewer available jobs for which the officers can apply. Conversely, more positions may be created as a response to homeland security issues and more vacant positions may open up in order to fill the void left by deputies who have been activated to serve in the military reserves.

Respondents from over half of the participating sheriffs' offices described their current recruitment efforts as neutral with another 23 percent describing their efforts as either passive or somewhat passive. Currently, the sheriffs' offices are using those recruitment strategies which are perceived to be the most effective and utilizing a wide variety of recruitment techniques beyond those considered to be the traditional methods of recruiting.

### Recommendation # 1

It is suggested that the state's sheriffs' offices consider increasing their current recruitment programs to make them more proactive and aggressive in nature. Survey findings indicate that the sheriffs' offices are using a host of innovative strategies, in addition to the standardized traditional recruitment techniques; however these strategies are not being used to their fullest extent. Intensifying recruitment efforts while continuing to use the same effective techniques which the offices are currently using, should increase both the quality and quantity of future applicant pools. It is anticipated that more aggressive recruitment efforts will expand the current average of six applicants, per vacant position, considerably.

A relatively large percentage of the respondents noted concerns about the current applicant screening process with serious concerns being expressed about the lack of scrutiny directed toward individuals entering BLET. Given the fact that across the state, 80 percent of the newly employed sworn deputies have already completed BLET, the importance of pre-BLET screening should be apparent.

### Recommendation # 2

Serious consideration should be directed at examining current BLET screening procedures and further consideration should be given to exploring options for strengthening and improving the screening process. This issue was also identified as a serious concern among those police departments that participated in the police research study. Since both sheriffs' offices and police departments use the same core BLET curriculum and training facilities this issue will overlap, and impact, both law enforcement agency types. Numerous recommendations were offered in this area including requiring a mandatory passing score on standardized entrance exams, minimum reading and writing test requirements as well as having all interested parties pass the minimum training and standards employment requirements prior to enrolling in a BLET course of instruction.

## **Recruitment and Retention of Sworn Sheriffs' Personnel**

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Despite the fact that over 70 percent of the surveyed offices have experienced either stable or declining turnover rates during the past three years, statewide turnover in the sheriffs' offices was almost 13 percent. The average length of stay for sworn deputies who terminate employment with the sheriffs' office, is 28 months and typically these officers leave to pursue other law enforcement careers with larger agencies and state criminal justice agencies.

### **Recommendation #3**

In an effort to lower turnover even further, and improve retention, work is needed to explore options for retaining officers beyond the 28 month critical mark including proposals to address increasing officer salaries during this critical period. In addition to cost of living adjustments, merit pay, standardized pay scales, increased pay for education, specialized training and in-grade step increases should be considered. Graduated pay scales based on length of service, with or without supplemental state funding, were mentioned as possible alternatives.

### **Recommendation #4**

Other non-financial means for retaining deputies should also be examined and given equal weight, especially in light of the current economic crises that many county governments are experiencing. Sheriffs' offices should capitalize, and take advantage of the opportunity to provide more educational and training assistance, as surprisingly this benefit was rated as a more effective retention tool than formal promotions. Sponsoring officer training and allowing officers to attend classes to further their education is less expensive compared to other retention techniques, and would be more cost-effective for the agency in the long run.

### **Recommendation #5**

A more detailed and in-depth study should be conducted to further assess the issue of lateral transfers within the law enforcement community. Issues such as why officers switch agencies, including questions regarding salaries/ benefits and promotions at a higher rank, should be studied. Deputies who leave for employment with state agencies and larger law enforcement agencies should be contrasted with those transferring to agencies of the same size and smaller. Attention should be directed at examining the amount of crossover within the number of lateral transfers; i.e. how many deputies transfer to police departments versus the number of police officers who transfer to sheriffs' offices. Recommendations should be directed at reducing the number of lateral transfers across law enforcement agencies which may include consideration of salary issues, extending an officer's employment contract to three years and a combination of employment restrictions and incentives to remain with an agency once employed.

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## Recruitment and Retention of Sworn Sheriffs' Personnel

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Prior SystemStats and reports include:

Evaluating North Carolina's Statewide Automated Victim Assistance and Notification (SAVAN) System

Recruitment and Retention of Detention Facility Personnel (SystemStats)

Technology on Patrol: An Evaluation of Mobile Data Computers in Law Enforcement Vehicles (SystemStats)

Recruitment and Retention of Sworn Police Personnel (SystemStats)

CyberCrime Study

Juvenile Structured Day Programs for Suspended and Expelled Youth: A Statewide Assessment

Effective Strategies for Domestic Violence Shelters: Strengthening Services for Children

Geographic Information Systems for Small and Medium Law Enforcement Jurisdictions (SystemStats)

Dispositional Outcomes of Domestic Violence Ex-Parte and Domestic Violence Protective Orders (SystemStats)

Domestic Violence Shelters and Minorities

Domestic Violence: Dispositional Outcomes of Protective Orders in the Courts

A Process and Impact Evaluation of the North Carolina Communities that Care Initiative

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Juvenile Day Treatment Centers - Strategies and Effective Practices

Law Enforcement Domestic Violence Units: Handbooks

Some of these reports can also be found on the Governor's Crime Commission website below:

**<http://www.ncgccd.org>**

## Recruitment and Retention of Sworn Sheriffs' Personnel

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Analysis Center's areas of current study:

Recruitment and Retention of Public Safety  
Personnel

Youth Gangs

Methamphetamines in North Carolina

SAVAN Evaluation  
Mobile Data Computers

Grant Sustainability



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The Governor's Crime Commission was established in 1977 by the North Carolina General Assembly under G.S. 143B-479. Its primary duty is "to be the chief advisory body to the Governor and the Secretary of the Department of Crime Control and Public Safety for the development and implementation of criminal justice policy." The Crime Commission is always open to comments and suggestions from the general public as well as criminal justice officials. Please contact us and let us know your thoughts and feelings on the information contained in this publication or on any other criminal justice issue of concern to you.			
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